

One method for teaching a running contact

Introduction

There are many ways to teach a running contact, this is just one. There are pluses and minuses to a running contact.

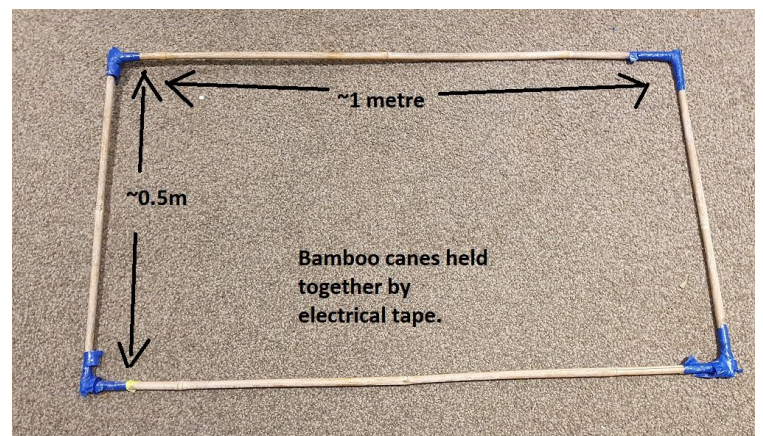
Pluses, it's faster and reduces pressure on the dog's joints, especially coming down the A Frame.

Minus: there's greater potential for missing the contact, for 2 reasons:

1. the criteria can be less clear than 2-on-2-off for your dog, which can create a less consistent performance
2. contact equipment in New Zealand has a lot more variety than international equipment, which means your dog's contact might be perfect at our club, but go to a club where the dog-walk ramps are longer and less steep and you might find your dog had a different understanding of the expected behaviour!

What you'll need

1. Make a box out of bamboo canes. The dimensions don't have to be exact, about 1m by half a metre. Mine is held together by electrical tape at the corners.
2. Lots of treats! Treats are easier than a toy.
3. A marker that tells your dog they're getting it right (like the word "yes" or "good" or a clicker). The marker should always be followed by a treat.



Let's get started

Keep sessions short – **2 minutes max**. Set a kitchen timer or the timer on your phone. Your dog might not complete a whole step in a single session. Move at your dog's pace. Be consistent and happy.

Step 1: Introduce the box

Goal: Your dog understands to get some of their feet inside the box.

- 1.1 If your dog looks at the box, mark it (“yes”) and throw a treat in the box.
- 1.2 As soon as the dog steps even 1 foot inside the box to get the treat, mark it and throw another treat in the box.
- 1.3 Once your dog has scooped all the treats, they’ll look at you for more. Be patient, wait for your dog to re-engage.
- 1.4 Call them out of the box, and reward them for coming to you.
- 1.5 Now wait for the dog to look at/move toward the box – mark it – throw a reward. Repeat!
- 1.6 Very quickly, it’ll be very difficult to get the dog out of the box (which is why step 1.3 is so important)
- 1.7 To start with, you’re marking any number of paws in the box. In the next step, you’re going to start setting criteria.
- 1.8 You don’t give a cue word yet. Keep quiet, let the dog keep trying to work out what you want.

[Xena being shaped to the box for the first time](#) (Can you spot my mistake at about 56 seconds?*)

Now take the show on the road. Do this everywhere. Take that box with you everywhere you go with your dog. Do it at the park, in the lounge, at club, in your backyard...literally everywhere!

* my mistake is not marking and rewarding when Xena went into the box very deliberately!

Step 2: make the box the best place in the world to be

Goal: your dog wants all 4 feet in the box soooo bad!

- 2.1 Up until now, any number of paws was ok. Now you’re going to set criteria. You want 4 paws in that box.
- 2.2 Be patient, let your dog offer behaviours, as soon as there are 4 paws – mark it and reward it.
- 2.3 Call your dog out of the box, reward.
- 2.4 Let your dog find the box with all 4 feet.

Troubleshooting: If your dog gets frustrated, then drop the criteria a little, 2 paws, then 3 paws, until you reach 4. Bigger dogs may find this harder than small dogs, so think about how treat placement will help your dog work it out. Lots of treats while in the box is the key!

Take it on the road! Now go to lots of different places again. Start 1 or 2 steps easier than your dog can do at home. E.g. if your dog is happily targeting with all 4 feet at home, then when you go to the park accept a couple of repetitions with only 2 or 3 feet to start with.

Step 3 Chasing the box

Goal: Your dog jumps into the box and powers out again. Instead of rewarding being in the box, you're rewarding travel through the box.

- 3.1 Now as your dog enters the box, mark it, and throw the treat a bit past the box so your dog has to chase it.
- 3.2 Your dog should turn and race towards the box again, as they bounce in – mark it and throw the reward.
- 3.3 Before long, your dog should start anticipating the thrown reward and be running through the box. Hopefully, you'll feel some "flow" with the sequence. It'll feel almost automatic. (This is an awesome feeling in dog training!)
- 3.4 This is when you start getting picky about criteria. You're aiming for smooth bouncing in and powering out of the box, each foot must go inside the box at some point. Fix this in your head, this is now your contact criteria. This will be what you want your dog doing on every piece of contact equipment.

[Frank Step 2 and step 3](#). Working on building value for the box then adding the chase.

[Frank, Step 3 merging into step 4](#). You'll see at about 1'15" he starts walking toward me, then thinks about what he's doing and turns back to the box (I did not cue the box - he just knew that's how you make the cookie appear!)

Troubleshooting: If your dog doesn't get all four feet, withhold the reward. If you get 3 failures, go back a step – make it easier so you get success.

Step 4: Handler movement

Goal: your dog can target the box no matter what you're doing.

Once you and your dog are happily performing step 3.4, it's time to add your movement:

- 4.1 Start slow walking backwards and forwards as your dog is performing the box.
- 4.2 Try jogging on the spot, star jumps, hop on one leg, flail your arms!
- 4.3 Now start running backwards and forwards with your dog.
- 4.4 Now try walking then running in the opposite direction from your dog's direction of travel.

Troubleshooting: If you put your dog off, GREAT! You're wanting to test their boundaries. Failure shows you the edge of your dog's understanding. Suitable responses are: laughing, or saying "nice try". Being grumpy is not an option!

Frank will often get a lower value treat (e.g. a kibble from dinner) to acknowledge that he tried but didn't get it. Then if he tries again and succeeds, oh my we do a dance and give lots of high value treats.

Step 5: Distance targeting

Now add your distance, and get your dog running away from you to the box and chasing a thrown reward. Slowly back away from the box as your dog is targeting the box.

Because we've made it harder by moving the target further away, reduce your movement. Whenever we make something difficult in a new way, we should make it easier somewhere else, reducing your movement makes it easier.

Step 6: Distance targeting & handler movement.

Basically put together steps 4 & 5. Maintain criteria - make sure you're still getting all 4 paws in the box.

Polly: Revisiting steps 5 & 6, It's obviously been a while! <https://youtu.be/BnZdaUWyKWo>
In the first minute you see Polly struggling quite a bit. So you'll see me try lots of different things, but essentially reduce my movement and my distance.

At the 2'40" mark, Polly doesn't get all her feet in the box, so I withheld the reward. On the next repetition she goes much further out and really nails that target!

And don't forget to take the show on the road!

Step 7: Introducing the contact equipment.

Now put the box at the end of a ramp.

I use a length of 2"x10" with rubber door mats screwed on for grip with one end propped up on some homemade steps. Use anything to raise one end - but make sure your ramp is stable and your dog can easily wait at the top.

Now that you've made it much harder in one respect (putting the box on a ramp). Go all the way back to step 2 and work your way back up to step 6.

Here's Polly: <https://youtu.be/eNwEm-bzmGc>

Bring your box to club and try it on the real contact equipment - make sure your criteria (jump in and power out) remain the same.

So when do I start using a cue word?

If you're sticking to pure shaping methodology, it's only when you've got a complete behaviour that you introduce the cue word - i.e. on the ramp with handler movement and distance.

I personally would probably start using the cue word instead of the marker word at step 6. I.e. instead of saying "yes", I'd start saying "tag it" - or whatever you want to use - **as** the dog is going through the box. Then start using the cue word **before** the dog goes through the box.

In the videos, you'll hear me using my cue with my older dog earlier than step 6. This is because this is an established behaviour for her.